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ABSTRACT

The role of education in the art museum has taken on new dimensions as their education departments are faced with a broader and larger public audience than ever before. This paper documents education practice at a contemporary art museum. The paper delineates an interpretive inquiry through which a group of museum educators sought to understand their practice. The paper explains that this inquiry seeks to document the role that a participatory action researcher played in the effort to study the phenomenon of educators collaboratively developing an understanding about practice in a contemporary art museum. It states that the researcher and collaborators developed a framework for discussion. The model presented indicates the range of issues that emerged for these museum educators. The author worked as an intern and a participatory action researcher with 12 educators and one coordinator over a 4-month period as they developed curricula for four different exhibits and delivered school and adult visits in the context of six different exhibits overall. The paper presents findings as they relate to the growth of this community of practice and discusses the challenges and merits of participatory action research as a methodology for this particular setting. It outlines the backdrop to the study, the argumentative features of the article, and culminates in the formal statement of the problem and questions addressed by this investigation. Includes two figures. (Contains 31 references.) (BT)

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Participatory Action Research in a Contemporary Art Museum: Findings from a Researcher/Practitioner Partnership

A paper for a poster presentation at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association,
New Orleans, LA, April 1-5, 2002.

Nathalie Lemelin
With the collaboration of Marie-France Bérard

Introduction

Museums have helped shape North American society in the past, and have the potential to play an even more aggressive role in shaping its education in the future. Museums offer a powerful educational model that can influence and reform education. However in order to achieve such reform, museum staff have to reexamine and rethink some of the most fundamental assumptions they hold about *what* they do and *how* they do it. They need to reclaim the sense of leadership and creativity that characterized the early days of museums in North America (See Levine, 1988). As for art museums, they have become increasingly high profile in their service to multifaceted communities through their temporary exhibitions and permanent collections. The role of education in the art museum has taken on new dimensions as their education departments are now faced with a broader and larger public than ever before, inside and outside the museum walls.

This paper documents museum education practice at a contemporary art museum. It is an interpretive inquiry through which a group of museum educators sought to understand their practice. Furthermore, it is an inquiry that seeks to document the role a participatory action researcher played in the effort to study the phenomenon of educators collaboratively developing an understanding about practice in a contemporary art museum.

In this inquiry, I worked as an intern and a participatory action researcher with 12 educators and one coordinator over a four-month period as they developed curricula for four different exhibits and delivered school and adult visits in the context of six different exhibits overall. As a participant in the education team, I helped develop curricula, pedagogical content for the museum's education website and collaborated on a workshop about learning theories. As a researcher, part of the education team, I witnessed these educators developing an understanding of what it means to them to be an educator in a contemporary art museum and define their participation within their community. Together, researcher and collaborators developed a framework for discussion based on Etienne Wenger's (1998) *Communities of Practice*. The model presented here indicates the range of issues that emerged for us, as museum educators.

In this paper, I present findings as they relate to the growth of this community of practice and I discuss the challenges and merits of participatory action research as a methodology for this particular setting. Below I will outline the backdrop to the study, including the argumentative thread that runs through it and culminates in the formal statement of the problem and questions this inquiry addressed.

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State of the field

There is currently a body of research that exists about museums and education, however there seems to be a certain disconnection of knowledge and findings when it comes to museum education practice specifically. Through the years the role of museum educator has been discussed, debated, defined and redefined, but rarely investigated. Museum educators generally possess a wide range of interests, competencies and commitments resulting in differing attitudes, values, hiring policies and practices within museum education departments. Furthermore, education and discipline background of museum educators have not traditionally provided credibility for educators in the eyes of their curatorial and administration colleagues (see Eisner and Dobbs, 1986). Thus, in conducting participatory action research in a museum education department, I saw enormous potential for empowerment of museum educators, as well as opportunities for professional development.

Context for research

In reviewing museological literature, I have found that there is an acknowledgement of existing curricula within museums (Beer & Marsh, 1988, Soren 1992, Vallance, 1995) and that educational theory is indeed relevant to its development and implementation. In recent years there has been a distinction between the "educational role of the museum" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999), "learning in the museum" (Hein, 1998) or "learning from museums" (Falk & Dierking, 2000), however practice-related issues have yet to be addressed. Existing theory does not *empower* practitioners with concrete pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) they can bring to their practice and very little has been written to help museum practitioners establish curricula. This becomes an issue for educators to gain credibility in the eye of their museum colleagues – curators, administrators – as well as in their attempt to make their work less 'incidental'. At the dawn of the 21st century, museum educators must become defenders of their audiences and specialists of learning theories, as well as investigators of their practice (Blais, 2000).

To be sure, there are a few empirical studies in the area for practitioners to access and encourage them to reflect on their own practice. Inspired by the works of Wolf and Tymitz (1978) on a naturalistic responsive approach, Mary Herbert (1980) portrayed how a museum's educational role was both created and viewed by teachers, students, museum education staff, and staff from other departments. Soren's doctoral dissertation (1990) explored the process of curriculum making in the museum. Soren was interested in gaining insights into deliberations about what educational ends were worth pursuing and what educational intentions were valued by museum workers across museums (p.9). Lisa Roberts' seminal work *From Knowledge to Narrative; Educators and the Changing Museum* (1997) has been influential in acknowledging museum educators' activist role in effecting changes to exhibit planning and development. Castle's (2001) dissertation work makes a significant contribution to "the nature and experience of teaching within the museum setting from the perspective of the teacher" (p.1). Castle looks at the contexts and experiences of museum teachers' practices and how these inform what they know about teaching in the museum.

Although each museum's situation tends to be unique in terms of educational decisions made (Soren, 1992), in this paper I present a case, an example, of collaborative work via a participatory model where practitioners work together to develop a better understanding of their practice and grow professionally. This

example will show how such a model resulted in empowering educators through reflections about practice.

The following questions have guided my inquiry:

1) What constitutes museum education practice in an art museum?;
2) How do staff members collaborate on current educational practice and the existing museum curriculum?; and
3) How can participatory action research contribute to the professional development of museum practitioners?

Introduction to the Study

Because of my interest in examining and understanding practice, it was clear I had to participate in the research process. The research orientation I was contemplating being participatory action research necessitated negotiations with the museum. Briefly, action research is a form of practitioner research that can be used to help improve professional practice in many different types of workplaces. It is an intervention in practice to bring about improvement. The action is driven by educational values that need to be explored in the milieu and then be defended. Well-conducted action research can lead to: a) one's own personal development; b) better professional practice; c) improvements in the institution in which one works; and d) making a contribution to the good order of society (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996, p.8).

Hence I initiated a dialogue with Marie-France Bérard – the school visits' coordinator in the Department of Education and Documentation – at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) and explored the possibility of an internship within the department. This would allow me to collaborate on daily practices, special projects and at the same time, collect data. The details of the internship within the participatory action research process follow in the methodology section.

Approach and Methods

As discussed above, conducting participatory action research required my full time involvement in the department of Education and Documentation at the MACM. In this section, I detail my work as an intern in the department and then introduce my collaborators in the study before discussing data collection procedures and interpretation.

Description of the internship within the Participatory Action Research process

I began the internship in August 2001. The work I was to do as an intern was left up to my own initiatives and interests within the department. I wanted to do something useful and practical, i.e., produce materials and documents that would benefit the department in a very concrete way, as well allow the action research to evolve.

In order to do that I had to immerse myself in readings about current and upcoming exhibits. It was still summer and most educators were away which gave me time to get up to date on the literature. And so I read. I read about Canadian and international artists featured in the two summer exhibits. I read about 'relational aesthetics' for an upcoming installation. And I read about Iran, Islam and video installations for the *Shirin Neshat* retrospective opening in the fall. This was a very fulfilling experience, much like taking a university level course in contemporary art.

The Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ)Curriculum

The first project I tackled was to produce summary tables which documented the competences across the disciplines for the new provincial curriculum[1] from kindergarten to grade 6. This was also congruent with some of Marie-France's concerns for the action research project as discussed when the internship and action research were first negotiated. In total, I created 10 tables. Marie-France and I then looked at them, separately and then together, to discuss how these could be used in planning school visits for Iranian-born artist *Shirin Neshat's* first retrospective exhibit. Subsequently these tables were used again for planning school visits for two other exhibits during the study period.

Developing pedagogical content for the MACM's education web site

In daily conversations with Marie-France, she mentioned that she was interested in having information pertaining to the MEQ curriculum's competencies available on-line for school teachers to consult prior to booking a visit at the museum. I volunteered to create a document to that effect as part of my internship. This was fascinating work for me as I was acquiring a tremendous amount of knowledge about contemporary art, more specifically video installations, Iran and Islam. By the same token I was able to apply the curriculum work I had done and readings about *Shirin Neshat's* works to something concrete, a website for teachers to consult. The result may be viewed at the following URL: http://media.macm.qc.ca/edu/macm_edu/neshat/frsetneshat.htm (it is available only in French).

Multicultural Education

The *Shirin Neshat*[2] exhibit opened on September 28th. In light of the events of September 11th and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, the MACM's educators were often faced with having to deconstruct stereotypes during their visits, particularly those with adolescent and adult visitors. Having taken a course on 'curriculum, popular culture and social difference', I offered to produce a document pertaining to multi-cultural education. The goal was not to offer strategies as such, rather to impart a summary of current thought on cultural literacy. This was done in an informal way and I did not get specific feedback pertaining to this document.

Conducting visits with school visitors

Although it had not been planned in the original negotiations of the internship, I conducted school visits on two separate occasions when staff were ill or unavailable to carry out tours. Leading these visits allowed me to truly take part in practice and gain incredible perspective on the MACM's educators work and reality. Furthermore, I believe it had an impact on the way the educators perceived me. While up to that point they had demonstrated their appreciation for me and the action research, carrying out the tours enabled me to truly win their respect. As for myself, I acquired a more complete perspective of what it means to do participatory action research.

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[1] Curricular reform planning and implementation in Quebec began in 1997 and will be completed by 2003 at the elementary and secondary level.

[2] Briefly the Neshat exhibit comprised of 6 video installations and 15 photographs. The themes the artist deals with are exile, men-women relationships, Western views on Islam, etc.

Workshop: Constructivism and Multiple Intelligences Theory

I conducted two formal interviews with Marie-France. During the second interview, we talked about PROJECT MUSE, a research project for educators in art museums put forth by Howard Gardner and Jessica Davis at Harvard University. After that interview and many other discussions about this particular project, we decided to collaborate on a professional development workshop. Our objective was twofold. First, we aimed at presenting the two learning theories underpinning PROJECT MUSE: Constructivism and Multiple Intelligences. Subsequently, we planned a more practical section to the workshop, which intended to revisit PROJECT MUSE with the educators and examine its possibilities for their practice. The result was a three-hour session with the entire staff.

In the paragraphs below, I discuss the role of collaborator or co-researcher in action research and introduce my colleagues at the MACM.

The Collaborators

The aim of action research is personal improvement for social transformation, so it is essentially collaborative. "Action research is a way of working that helps us identify the things we believe in and then work systematically and collaboratively, one step at a time, to making them come true" (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996, p. 38). The term 'collaborators' here is used to refer to the people with whom I worked and conducted this project. From the first meeting I had with the MACM's educators in September, I specified that action research is participatory and those who are involved become co-researchers rather than informants. Furthermore, I stressed that action research is about sharing ideas, interpretations and conclusions with an educated audience who are willing and able to judge the authenticity and relevance of the work they do in their particular professional context. Thus, during the four-month study, I developed relationships with my collaborators in which they gave me critical feedback on the action research process and, in many ways, they shared the experience of being an action researcher.

<u>The MACM's Educators</u>

Epistemologically, the MACM's educators' practice is informed by constructivism. There might be several reasons for this, for instance contemporary art, as a discipline, calls for a social construction of meaning. I will not digress into a discussion of constructivism here, but will present an excerpt from one educator's visits as an example of this constructivist-informed practice.

> *Marie-Hélène with a group of grade 9 students*
>
> The group has just watched one of Neshat's video installations (*Soliloquy)* in which the artist has the lead role.
>
> MH: I'd like to hear your comments after viewing *Soliloquy.* What did you think?
>
> Student: The music was awesome!
>
> MH: Music is very important to Neshat. The story is told...
>
> Student: She looked gruesome. We could hear her cry and she didn't look happy!
>
> Student: I think she's mixed up. She's stuck between two worlds.
>
> MH talks about Neshat's own culture shock when she returned to Iran after living in the US for 14 years. She then asks: "I'd like us to talk about Neshat's idea of projecting the film on two opposing screens."
>
> Student: I think the two screens represent the two worlds.

Student: Why are the screens so far apart?

MH explains that the distance has been planned this way by the artist.

Same Student: Why aren't the two screens on the same wall?

MH: Good question, why? Where are we as spectators?

Students: In the middle!

MH: So we're not comfortable. She makes us live this experience of being caught between two cultures.

I should specify that the MACM's educators are all current or recent graduate students and part-time employees of the museum which makes for an extremely dynamic and enthusiastic team. They range in age between 24 and 38. Marie-Hélène, Geneviève, Véronique and Marc-Yvan are permanent employees. They work between 12-17 hours weekly. Rhonda, Marie-Claude, Florence, Guillaume and Anthony are non-permanent employees and are scheduled according to their seniority in the department.

Marie-Hélène

Marie-Hélène was, at the time of the study, and until recently, a graduate student in museum studies. In terms of her academic background, Marie-Hélène holds undergraduate degrees in law and literature. She has recently completed her Master's in museum studies.

Marie-Hélène is an experienced museum educator. Prior to being hired at the MACM in 1999, she had worked at the *Musée de la Civilisation* in Quebec City and as an intern at the *Royal Ontario Museum* in Toronto. Thus, it came as no surprised when she was offered two special contracts with the Department of Education and Documentation. For the first of those contracts she participated in writing texts for labels and brochure pertaining to one of the summer exhibits. The second contract required her to do research and prepare curriculum for a 2002 exhibit. This is work that Marie-France is normally responsible for, but because she had to take over didactic exhibit planning at the time, Marie-Hélène was offered a special contract.

Geneviève

Geneviève is a visual artist, her medium is print media. She has a strong intellectual bent and a keen interest in social issues, as well as research. Geneviève has been a museum educator for several years. Prior to being hired at the MACM in 1997, Geneviève had been a very versatile 'student on a government grant' working at the Art Centre in her home region of Abitibi. At the MACM Geneviève was also granted a full-time contract with the Department of Education and Documentation. For this contract, she planned the activities, hired personnel and ran the museum's summer day camp in 2001. Geneviève holds a BFA in Fine Arts and is currently working on a second BFA in Studio Art.

Véronique

Véronique holds a BA in the Theory of Art and Art History with minors in Drama and Visual Arts. She has been at the MACM since 1995, which makes her the most senior educator in the department after Marie-France. She knows every corner of the museum as well as everyone working at the museum. In addition to education, she is interested in curatorials, writing and editing, which has earned her three contracts with the curatorial department. She wrote the catalogue for a summer exhibit and has worked as an assistant-curator for the planning of the *Shirin Neshat* retrospective. She is currently working part-time on another project with the current artist-in-residence. She also recently developed curriculum for one of the

winter exhibits. Véronique was assigned this last project, like Marie-Hélène, because Marie-France had to work on exhibit planning.

Marc-Yvan

Marc-Yvan has been working at the museum'on and off' since 1998. He's an artist, art historian, philosopher, and editorialist. He is extremely well read and loves to engage his colleagues in debates about art, politics, history, philosophy and society. During the weeks that followed September 11th, Marc-Yvan took it upon himself to post articles, editorials and essays from various newspapers and magazines on the staff's bulletin board. He holds a BA in art history and is also a full-time visual artist and parent.

Rhonda

Rhonda is referred to as 'the voice of Cultural Studies'. She makes a point of presenting the 'other side of the coin' during staff meetings, often bringing a postcolonial, cultural studies view on a situation. She holds a BA and an MA in art history, her thesis focused on contemporary native art, more precisely on the works of Jimmy Durham. She first came to the MACM as an intern in 1998 as part of her graduate studies programme. She was hired as an educator later that same year. Rhonda has had a wide range of educational and curatorial experiences. Before coming to the MACM she had volunteered at an artist-run center in her hometown of Swift Current (Saskatchewan) and done an internship at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.

Recently, she has curated exhibits at an artist-run center and at a local community museum. She has produced catalogues for both of those exhibits. Toward the end of my internship she took a leave from the Department of Education and Documentation to work in the curatorial department for a brief contract. She coordinated procedures and materials for the *Shirin Neshat* exhibit which is currently traveling to three American cities.

Marie-Claude

Marie-Claude has been working in the department since 1999. Before her move to education in 2000, Marie-Claude worked at the front desk. She once told me she was slowly climbing the museum's corporate ladder. Education and Curatorial offices are located on the second floor of the museum, while Management offices are on the third and fourth floor. Marie-Claude has earned herself a reputation in the department for being 'fascinated' with death and dying. This is due to the fact that she has gone through several death-related experiences (such as working as a clerk at the city morgue) to better understand death as a phenomenon. She is an art historian and is writing her master's thesis on the representation of death in contemporary art.

Florence

Florence started out as an actor. She holds a BA in drama with a minor in French Literature, and a BFA in Studio Art. She is the proud mother of two school-aged daughters. As an artist, Florence enjoys going to her daughters' school to talk about art and related subjects (for instance what is a portfolio). She told me, on more than one occasion, that she feels her parenting experience is what helps her the most in her work at the MACM. In fact, she shares that expertise with her colleagues. Geneviève and Marie-Hélène frequently turn to her for advice on how to deal with groups of young children. Like Marie-Claude, Florence's debut at the museum was on the first floor at the museum's reception. She has been working as an educator at the MACM since 2000.

Guillaume

Guillaume was hired in 2000. In spite of his young membership in the department, he has had a variety of experiences working in different museums in Québec and in France. His experiences range from working as a security guard at a museum in Bordeaux to working as a tour guide in one of Montreal's historic houses. Like Marie-Hélène, he was offered a contract to write text labels for of one of the summer exhibits. As an art historian, his passion is for Italian Renaissance. He is currently writing his master's thesis and hopes to pursue doctoral studies in Italy.

Anthony

Anthony was hired at the same time as Guillaume. He holds a BFA in Studio Art and is a full-time visual artist. His current undertaking falls within the realm of relational aesthetics[3] and is characterized by an inflatable car. He and his 'partner-in-art' go around the city inflate the car, put money in a parkmeter and wait for people's reactions.

The Visit's Coordinator

As mentioned earlier, Marie-France is the MACM's coordinator for all guided tours. Generally her role requires that she develop curriculum, train and assess staff, conduct school visits, teach special interest groups[4] (university level art history class taught at the museum, blind and semi-blind students, adult literacy groups, VIPs), participate in general meetings with the Director of Education and Documentation along with other coordinators (media center, 'ateliers', 'action culturelle[5]' and publications), deal with special programmes (artists' talks, special government sponsored initiatives, school board partnerships), schedule school groups and staff accordingly, develop and manage the education website and occasionally fill in for other coordinators. This is why she curated two didactic exhibits during the fall.

Marie-France is an art historian. She is currently writing her master's thesis on Italian Renaissance art. She started at the MACM as a summer student in 1993. She worked as a part-time educator until 1995 when the department of Education and Documentation underwent a complete reshuffle and full-time professional positions were created. Marie-France applied for, and was offered, a professional coordinator position.

Marie-France is a dynamic leader for her team of educators. As an art historian, heading education, she has sought opportunities for professional development in attending conferences, such as Museums and the Web, CAGE (Canadian Art Gallery/Art Museum Educators) and The Learneds (a Social Studies Research conference[6]). She has read extensively about museum education and has kept up with American, British and Canadian literature on the subject. Throughout

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[3] *Relational aesthetics* refers to art that turns spectators (viewers) into participants, suggesting that the art object itself is less important than the interactions it may create between people.

[4] The reader should note that I have decided to use the label 'special interest group' to distinguish these from regular school groups in order to offer a better picture of Marie-France's work. She, however, would insist on saying these are 'regular' groups.

[5] *Action culturelle* is a relatively new concept in Québécois museology. It was introduced in the 1970s, but really soared in the 1980s with events taking place in museums such as: conferences, round tables, entertainment (films, music, dance or theatre). Canadian and American museologists refer to this as *public programming*.

[6] The Learneds annual conference would be the Canadian equivalent of AERA's annual meeting. The term Learneds is used to designate a larger umbrella under which fall many associations such as the Canadian Society for Study in Education.

the four-month project we exchanged journal articles, books and web sites of interest.

The Director of Education and Documentation

The director of Education and Documentation at the MACM is Lucette Bouchard. She has been with the MACM since 1982 and has always worked in education. For the first seven years of her career, she worked as a cultural agent (government designation) and headed education at the museum. In 1989, she became Head of publications and in 1992, she was appointed as Director of Education and Documentation. Lucette has an undergraduate degree in Art History, a Master's in Museum Studies. She is currently contemplating pursuing doctoral studies in Communications. Lucette was not directly involved in the action research process as her schedule does not allow her to be involved in the daily activities of the MACM's educators. She participated in a formal interview and was invited to every focus group meeting, but was not able to attend any of them.

Ethical considerations

As discussed earlier, in action research, colleagues become collaborators and help in data collection, data analysis and discussions of findings based on analyses. In this sense, it is important, as is the case in any type of research, to adhere to some strict ethical principles. Mohr (2001) has proposed the model below to begin thinking about ethical considerations in action research.

TRADITIONAL RESEARCH		PRACTITIONER RESEARCH
Past	Turned into ⇨	Present and future
Human subjects	Turned into ⇨	Co-researchers and collaborators
Owning credit	Turned into ⇨	Shared credit
Literature searches	Turned into ⇨	Experiences and reading
Secrets and objectivity	Turned into ⇨	Openness and disciplined subjectivity
No bias	Turned into ⇨	Admitted and acknowledged bias

The action researcher's primary responsibility is to the research context, i.e., the setting and the people that make it up, whether they are teachers, students, curators, museum educators, visitors, or administrators. As action researchers we are practitioners first and we must respect those with whom we work, openly sharing information about our research. And "while [we] seek understanding and knowledge, [we] also nurture the well-being of others" (Mohr, 2001, p.9). In the section that follows I describe details of the methodology and how I kept my collaborators informed and involved in the research process.

Data Types & Collection Procedures

Research methods used, along with a brief description of each, are described below:

Anecdotal Records: Detailed field notes were made during: i) meetings amongst museum education personnel, ii) observations of interpretive visits for schools and adult visitors, and iii) personal reflections and observations;

Semi-structured Conversational Interviews: One or two 'formal' interviews were conducted with each staff member. These interviews were grounded in descriptive data which include questionnaires that were distributed to each participant to get their reactions and understandings of practice at different stages of the research process and before each interview;

Focus Group Meetings: Pre- and post-intervention focus-group interviews were conducted. These aimed at getting a better understanding of staff involvement in curriculum and planning as well as documenting the dialogues that were inherent in staff collaboration.

Documentary Evidence: Curriculum materials, along with materials on art education were collected and coded;

Journals: In total I spent 57 days working at the museum and I wrote in my journal conscientiously every day. My daily journal entries allowed me to make careful notes about action plans, strategies favored, reflection on practice and reflection on actions.

Research Progress Reports: I produced four progress reports and made them available for reading and comments to all who were involved in the project (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996).

Data Interpretation – Grounded Theory

I began making sense of the data, as well as make preliminary interpretations, as I was carrying out the action research. It was an on-going monitoring process in which I involved other people (critical colleagues from the university as well as colleagues from the MACM) to interpret the data. McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) suggest that as action researchers we should "aim to involve people as fully as possible in documenting their own practice and in explaining, interpreting and evaluating what happens" (p.73). In the present case, this was achieved by: a) asking the museum practitioners to record their intentions and motives as well as providing a sort of 'lesson plan' before conducting the museum visit; b) making notes as a researcher observing museum colleagues and asking these practitioners to make notes about the museum visit once it had been conducted; and c) making sense of the data in collaboration with the practitioners developing action research skills themselves.

Also, throughout the data collection and interpretive stages, I monitored and recorded all critical conversations about the research. More specifically, I made notes about my plans and intentions, as well as discussions about data with museum colleagues and critical friends. This was important because it allowed us (the MACM staff and myself) to become aware of and to record significant moments of change in practice, as well as notice changes in our own thinking over time. I wanted to foster an environment which encouraged the MACM staff to fully become co-researchers in this project, because their critical perspective shaped the research project.

For data analysis, I categorized, synthesized, and searched for patterns to interpret the data collected. As mentioned above, I engaged in data analysis simultaneously with data collection to allow me to focus and shape the study as I

went along. I began by applying an initial coding scheme, i.e., I began by locating data bits in broad categories and eventually as I collected more data those categories divided and subdivided (Glesne, 1999, p.133). Then, once the coding was completed, I looked at the themes and patterns that shaped my data. And once the data collection was completed, I proceeded to analytic coding. At that point I used my initial coding scheme, but I focused on classifying and categorizing it by themes and sub-themes.

The approach I have described for data analysis and interpretation has been termed grounded theory. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss are known as the pioneers of grounded theory. In *The Disvovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) they challenged the hegemony of the quantitative research paradigm in the social sciences (see Charmaz, 2000). They proposed an inductive strategy whereby the researcher discovers concepts and hypotheses through constant comparative analysis. For Glaser and Strauss, "the ultimate function of theory is explanation and prediction" (Glesne, 1999, p. 22).

Results

In this section I report on two issues as they relate to research about museum education practice at the MACM. First I discuss the development of a model for a community of museum educator practitioners and then I report on the challenges and merits of conducting participatory action research in this particular setting.

Developing a Community of Practice

As I quickly became integrated in the daily activities of the department, I realized I had become more than a graduate student working as an intern in a museum for the purposes of a Participatory Action Research study. I had become part of a community. I was learning and the educators were learning. This was no longer just an action research into practice, it was about practice, and more particularly about a community of practitioners that fully integrated a researcher in their daily practices. The result I present here is the work of our community.

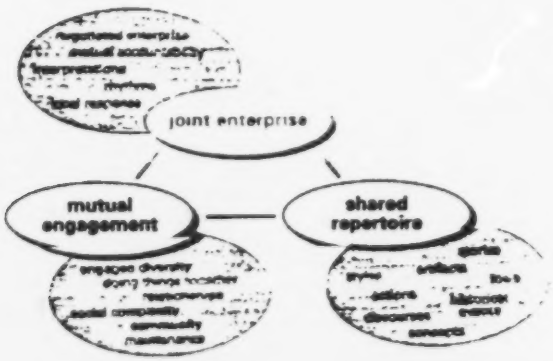
From the very beginning of the internship/study three issues became very clear and were consistent in the educators' discourse, they: 1) loved the work they did and felt passionate about it; 2) sought recognition from other departments within the museum; and 3) learned tremendous amounts from one another due to the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences. For instance, in her first interview, Geneviève explained:

> "I feel our work is not known. People don't know what we do. We work in the shadow of others, yet we are the ones who really know the public. Our job is to raise visitors' interest for the exhibits. We know a great deal about people's reactions to the works on display. When it comes to the institution, I feel some people are indeed interested in what we do – especially Marie-France and Lucette – and they give us a lot of recognition for what we do. Some curators are also interested. Some of them will ask how we are doing with the exhibits or how people are reacting to the exhibits. Some curators are curious about that. But there are other departments within the museum for which our work is unknown and I am disappointed by that. There are times when I feel that people forget that a museum is first and foremost for the public and we have a very special public at the museum. We welcome many children – school groups – at the museum and sometimes I feel as though people view us more as babysitters. It's as though we don't truly have an educational role within the museum."

Given these three issues I decided to introduce Etienne Wenger's work[7] about communities of practice first to Marie-France, and then to the educators. I thought the MACM's educators represented an exemplary community of practice as described by Wenger.

The primary focus of Wenger's theory is on learning as an act of social participation and epistemologically this idea gels well with participatory action research. According to Wenger (1998) the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in a community of practice. Furthermore what became relevant about his work were the implications in supporting learning for both individual members and for the community, i.e., for individuals, learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their community. For the community, learning is an issue of refining its practice and ensuring generations of new members.

I presented Wenger's three-part characteristic model (figure 1 below) for communities to the educators during the last month of the study. I helped them become more familiar with the terminology and explained Wenger's view of the three characteristics he proposes: 1) mutual engagement; 2) a joint enterprise; and 3) a shared repertoire.



Dimensions of practice as the property of a community.

FIGURE 1 Etienne Wenger's three-part model (1998, p. 73)

Wenger suggests that the first characteristic of practice as a source of coherence is the mutual engagement of participants. Practice "exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another [...] membership in a community of practice is therefore a matter of mutual engagement" (p.73). Specifically, engagement in the community of practice is what defines belonging in the community. For example, in order to be a full participant, it may be just as important to know and understand the latest gossip as it is to know and

[7] To Wenger (1998) a practice is what practitioners develop in order to be able to do their jobs and have a satisfying experience at work. It is in this sense that they contribute to a community of practice. Furthermore, the term practice is sometimes used as an antonym for theory, however Wenger's use of the term does not reflect a dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical. He acknowledges that "we all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate and share them" (p.48).

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understand the latest memo. Wenger also holds that mutual engagement does not entail homogeneity. "Indeed what makes engagement in practice possible and productive is as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity" (p.75). Each member finds a unique place and gains a unique identity which is further integrated and further defined over the course of the engagement in practice. Hence mutual engagement involves everyone's competences in the community. "It draws on *what we do* and *what we know*, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what *we don't do* and *what we don't know*" (p.76, emphases added). As a result it contributes to the knowledge of all members of the community

The second characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence, for Wenger, is the negotiation of a joint enterprise that keeps the community together. As stated above mutual engagement does not require homogeneity, consequently a joint enterprise does not entail absolute agreement. On the contrary, in some communities, disagreement may be viewed as a productive part of the enterprise. "The enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes in the same thing or agrees with everything, but in that it is communally negotiated" (p.78). Conditions, resources and demands for instance, only shape practice when they are negotiated by the community. Consequently, negotiating a joint enterprise requires relations of mutual accountability among members of the community. Finally rhythm is not random and it is not just a constraint to harmony. It is part of the dynamics of coordinating the process by which the community evolves.

The third and last characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence, in Wenger's terms, is the development of a shared repertoire. Over time, the joint pursuit of a joint enterprise produces resources for the community. The elements of a shared repertoire can be very heterogeneous. "They gain in coherence not in and of themselves as specific activities, symbols or artifacts, but from the fact that they belong to the practice of a community pursuing an enterprise" (p.82).

The community of educators at the MACM

Before presenting the MACM's educators' model for their community of practice, I will discuss the educators' practice in terms of some of the elements presented by Wenger as part of the three above-mentioned characteristics: a) diversity; b) rhythm; c) negotiating a common project; and d) response.

a) Diversity

The idea that of introducing Wenger's concept of a community of practice to the educators emerged from the very first interview with them. Unanimously, the educators told me that what allows them to grow the most is their daily interactions with one another. Véronique summarized it well:

> "We all come from different departments which leads us to be very stimulated intellectually. We come from different schools of thoughts and carry different approaches. Some people in the team have a more sociological approach to art, some are more formalistic while others produce art".

Indeed for some educators such as Geneviève, Anthony or Marc-Yvan it comes naturally to contribute information about technique because they are visual artists themselves. For Rhonda, it is her background in cultural studies that is ever present in her discussion with her peers. For Marie-Hélène, her background in literature allows for a different perspective on any given work. Influenced by her experience as a mother of two, Florence often brings new avenues to look at art with young children. Below is an excerpt from a staff meeting a few days after the opening of the Neshat exhibit. The educators are discussing various issues as they

relate to the elements of the artist's work as well as the context surrounding those elements.

> Marie-France stresses the importance of contrasting between two installations in order to deal with a theme that is very important for the artist: exile.
>
> Rhonda: I have some good articles about that.
>
> Marie-France: Bring them! We'll make copies for everyone. Véronique also told me she would bring the Peters article.
>
> Marc-Yvan: I think it would be interesting to talk about Orientalism. I would like to have a [paper] reproduction of a Delacroix.
>
> Marie-France: I have one, I also have a few *repros* of Ingres. Look in your books and see if you can come up with more.

This is only one sample of the type of conversations the MACM educators have as they are negotiating ways of approaching the art on display and building their repertoire of resources for each exhibit.

b) Rhythm

For the MACM's educators, rhythm refers to the quick pace at which exhibits come and go. The museum changes its permanent exhibit three to four times a year creating somewhat of a challenge for the museum's educators. The pieces shown are never the same. The museum owns over 6000 works of art and approaching its 10th year in its current downtown location, it has shown about 1000 of those works. This is important because it means the educators have to research and delve into in-depth studies about the works only a few weeks before they are on display. And then there are also special exhibits for which they have to research and study as well. In the four months of my internship at the MACM, the educators studied and prepared for six different exhibits. This is a unique situation. The educators discussed their concern over the quick rotation of exhibits during a focus group meeting:

> ... Marie-Hélène described a recent instance when she, Geneviève and Marc-Yvan had in depth discussions about Islam and stereotypes in Neshat's works. She referred to more challenging visits they had conducted. Together they went back to articles and discussed whether Neshat had intended her films to convey stereotypes. As a result of their research and discussion, the three of them felt more confident about their visits from that moment on...
>
> Véronique: That's like a community within a community, I mean it's fantastic that the three of you had that exchange and reached certain conclusions, but has anyone else on the team benefited from your exchange? I'm not sure... we may have had a clue, but...
>
> Marc-Yvan: Maybe you just heard feedback from our discussions but you know it would be interesting to hear feedback from all these discussions we may have over lunch or after conducting a visit.
>
> Véronique: This is fascinating because we are all passionate about what we do and that is why we have these conversations over lunch, but it is also a source of frustration because there are times when I feel like there are gaps in what I know because I work three days a week and not five, or because I always work with the same people... or because I often get a certain school. The Neshat exhibit will wrap up soon and I feel there are several themes I will have never covered!
>
> Marie-France: I find it interesting to listen to you as a manager because technically I should relay this type of information. You need to come and tell me about these discussions you are having. Sometimes I overhear your conversations, but perhaps we can do something more systematically. It's my job to relay the information and while it is unrealistic to think we could have meetings on a weekly basis – it's impossible, I don't

have enough budget – but it is important to relay that information. I have an idea... you see Nathalie we've just entered our day-to-day problems!

Nathalie: I know but this is very relevant!

Marie-France: I have an idea and we can talk about it again later. Perhaps I could get us a tape recorder and you could tape your conversations. I could listen to them and transcribe them to later make the transcripts available for everyone. So when you have significant discussions you can record them. At the very least people could listen to the tape. I'll prepare summaries and send them to you. We'll talk about this further at our next meeting, but this is very interesting.

Véronique: Because the lapse of time between exhibits is very short, isn't it? Nathalie, your were mentioning it before, I mean the nature of our work, as well as the nature of contemporary art and the fact that the exhibits change often. The lapse of time is very short.

Marie-France: If information is available it has to be disseminated right away.

Geneviève: It's always critical for us to get the information and to readjust ourselves accordingly.

So rhythm for the MACM's educators relates to the fast pace at which the exhibits rotate, but it can also refer to scheduling and the frequency at which educators work in a week and with whom they work. As an interesting post-study note, the MACM's educators have recently adopted the tape recorder technique for discussion about their current exhibitions.

c) Negotiating a Common Project

The educators at the MACM could not relate to Wenger's expression 'a joint enterprise'. To them it sounded too business-like and they felt misrepresented by this term. Consequently the opted for the term 'Common Project'. Similarly to Wenger's joint enterprise, the common project is the result of a collective process of negotiation that reflects the complexity of a mutual engagement on the part of the educators. It is what Wenger calls "their negotiated response to their situation" (1998, p.77). These negotiations then result in relations of mutual accountability among members of the community and that becomes and integral part of their practice. As stated earlier, in a joint enterprise, or a common project, it is not important that everyone believes or agrees on the same things. What is important is that it is communally negotiated. At the MACM the educators negotiate the curriculum (the 'canevas', the course taken and activities done with groups) for each exhibit.

d) Response

The term local response in Wenger's model refers to a community's response to a mandate that may be determined by an outside agent, by the museum's administration for instance. Wenger suggests that "even when a community of practice arises in response to some outside mandate, the practice evolves into the community's own response to that mandate" (1998, p. 80) The MACM's educators felt that the term local response was limited in the definition of their community. Consequently they added two other types of response: institutional response and external response.

Institutional response refers to the direct relationship the members of the community have with the institution and how their work might at times inform decisions made at the institutional level. An example of that has been one of the summer exhibits (*ArtCité)* which unusually displayed works of art all over the city. The exhibit itself was an initiative from the Department of Communications.

Educators were involved at many different levels: some wrote text labels, others did special tours sponsored by a car company, i.e., taking visitors in a car around the city to see the art while others were stationed daily at different sites to mediate and answer questions. A month before the exhibit ended, Marie-France instigated an evaluation procedure from within her department. Her staff were to assess their experience 'educating' the public and give her feedback. Marie-France then wrote a report and submitted to the communications department. This report will help the communications department plan for a sequel *ArtCité* in 2003.

External response refers to visitors' response to the educators work. Visitor response often helps educators reshape and/or refine their approaches. After every visit the educators –who are often paired – sit together to discuss their visit and write a report. As they discuss and write their report they often make notes about what they will change or keep in the way they 'teach'. The report is then logged and other educators have access to the log.

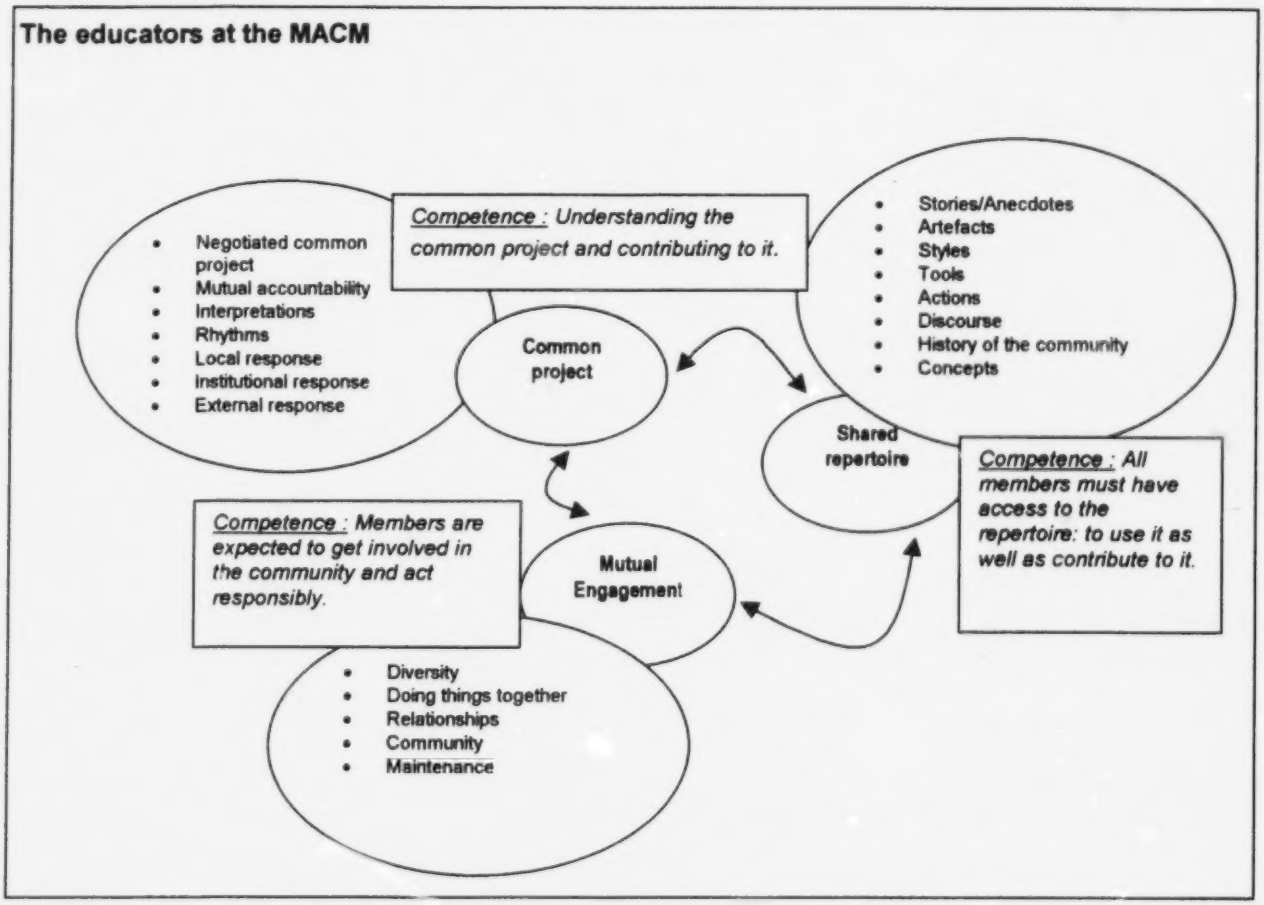

FIGURE 2: The MACM's Educators Community of Practice

As mentioned above I distributed Etienne Wenger's model to my collaborators along with a brief description. I asked them to look at the model and prepare comments for a focus group meeting.

When I first asked for comments on the model during that initial meeting, several questions arose. What did the three groupings mean exactly? Why the term enterprise? Was this supposed to represent the educators or the institution? Was there a hierarchy in the model? After two hours of discussion and negotiation the educators had reached a consensus on several aspects of the model:

1) The expression 'joint enterprise' was to be changed to 'common project' ;
2) Two other types of responses were to be added to local response, those were institutional response and external response;
3) Two-way arrows were to be added to join the circles; and
4) competences were to be added for each circle.

The MACM educators felt that the expression 'joint enterprise' was very business-oriented and were not comfortable using this expression. In discussing the model, another expression came up – common project – that seemed closer to the philosophical foundation of the department, i.e., putting knowledge in common, collaborating on educational practice.

Within that same 'characteristic' in the model was 'local response' as an element of the common project. The educators valued local response but suggested adding external response (for visitors make their community and their practice grow) and institutional response because their community is part of a larger one – the museum – and its response is also important to the dynamics of the educators' community.

In terms of the model as a whole, the two-way arrows were an important addition because they added fluidity to the model and also took away from any sort of hierarchy among the three groupings. Wenger chose to position the three circles in a triangular representation leading the museum's educator to view it as a hierarchy with the joint enterprise grouping at the top. The educators also added three competences used by Wenger (2000) to describe communities of practice and remind practitioners of the skills required to keep the community operating. The MACM educators felt these were key to the model and should be visible, as opposed to being embedded in descriptive text about the model.

Due to scheduling and holidays, not all educators were present at the first focus group meeting, I thought I would give the educators another opportunity to discuss the model in another focus group meeting. The educators were interested in reshaping the model once more. They expressed renewed concern about the hierarchy and did not fully understand that this model was about their community operating within the institution. Then it became clear to them that the flow of information and interaction among the three characteristics was key to their community and that had to be expressed clearly in the model. The solution was to have curved arrows instead of straight ones. This would alleviate the pyramid effect which had originally given them the impression that the model had a hierarchical structure. The other decision taken about the model was that the three circles be switched into an inverted pyramid construction which would remove the hierarchical effect altogether. Finally, the educators proposed to have a frame that would enclose the model showing that this unit was their community. The model that emerged from that last meeting is the one presented in Figure 2 of this paper.

Boundary

An important point Wenger makes about communities of practice is that they cannot be regarded as isolated from the rest of the world, or understood independently of other practices. Belonging to a community of practice necessitates

belonging not only to its internal configuration but also its relations with the rest of the world. As individuals, we participate in multiple communities of practice at once. For instance Marie-France, the visits coordinator, belongs both to management and the community of educators. Spanning that boundary is one of her main functions. Wenger suggests "our experience of multi-memberships always has the potential of creating various forms of continuity among them" (p.105). He proposes two forms of connections – boundary objects and brokering[8] – that allow practices to influence each other and participation in the community extends beyond the boundaries.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on brokering. For Wenger "brokering is a common feature of the relation of a community of practice with the outside" (p.109). In institutions, people in charge of special projects across functional units often find themselves brokering. If they are good brokers, in the sense that they enable new connections across communities, they open new possibilities for meaning. There has been and continues to be several opportunities of brokering for the MACM's educators' community. As mentioned above, Marie-France is an important broker, but so are Véronique and Rhonda when they have contracts in curatorials, or Genevieve after working as Day Camp coordinator in the ateliers.

Challenges and Merits of Conducting Participatory Action Research in a museum's education department

Being an intern at the MACM, and being fully engaged in its daily activities, allowed for incredible richness in data collection. However, an issue that often arises for the facilitator in participatory action research is knowing how to keep alive the sense of importance of the wider research inquiry, and how to support the group in arriving at an appropriate balance between review, action and evaluation (Burchell, 2000). The role of the facilitator in managing the larger project plays an important part in maintaining an appropriate balance between local needs and project goals. Pedretti (1996) suggests that knowing when and how to act is an issue of 'connoiseurship' and for the facilitator developing this level of competence is very important. Below I discuss some of the challenges that emerged for collaborators and researcher through this process and on a more positive note describe how this project was successful for all involved in the action research.

Challenges

There were two important challenges that emerged for this action research: time and scheduling.

Time was an issue for all the collaborators in the study. Essentially the educators would have wanted the project to carry on for a longer period of time to allow for more involvement. Moreover, in light of daily practices and scheduling whereby permanent educators are at the museum three to four times a week and non-permanent staff are there only three to four times a month, it is normal that they felt my presence among them was too short to allow for more participation on their behalf. Marie-France's and Marie-Hélène's comments summarize concerns about time involvement:

[8] Boundary objects refer to artifacts, documents, terms, and concepts around which communities of practice can organize their interconnections. Brokering refers to the connections provided by people who can introduce elements of one practice to another.

> "Action research is a methodology that requires much investment from everyone involved (researcher and staff). It demands investment, in terms of time and energy spent on reflections, analyses and research. The answers we seek aren't delivered to us once the process is over in a single block. Rather they lie in the discussions and actions in which we engage. The strength and the interest of this research process also constitute its difficulty, i.e., the investment it requires".

Marie-Hélène also specified:

> "As collaborators we are more involved in the research and we naturally feel more responsibilities towards the lead researcher. There were times when I felt that I didn't have enough time to contribute to the progress reports. There were interesting questions raised but I couldn't follow up on them as much as I would have liked."

Merits

Generally the action research was very profitable. For the purposes of this paper I will discuss four areas where this project was particularly successful: a) facilitator role; b) solutions c) empowerment; and d) professional development.

a) Facilitator role

The educators at the museum felt their direct collaboration in this project allowed them to be better informed about the progress of the research and that my involvement as a researcher in their daily practices contributed to enriching their community. Marie-Hélène wrote:

> "There were dialogues with Nathalie as we went along which allowed us to readjust. So it is the combination of her internship and research involving team members that made this experience particularly useful for us. If Nathalie had worked on theorizing on her own, this internship of a curriculum specialist would not have been as beneficial to us. Personally I feel that Nathalie successfully integrated us in her research. She was very present, very open and interested in what we did. She brought new and useful elements to our team."

Reflecting on the action research process, Geneviève also suggested:

> "The interaction between the researcher and the staff becomes a constructive exchange both at the research and practice level. By verifying theories or invalidating them, the researcher is able to push the research further."

b) Solutions

As mentioned above, striking a balance between local needs and research needs can be challenging, and at times it was, however, another positive outcome of this action research was the formulization of concrete solutions for practice. Véronique explained how through the process of the internship and proposed action research the community acquired new tools and resources for its repertoire:

> "The research allowed us to reflect on our practice and contextualize our role as museum educators within a theoretical framework which in turn allowed us to question ourselves about what we do as well as question our competences. The researcher's real and concrete involvement in the team has helped us develop concrete, specific and usable tools in the context of our day-to-day work".

For Marie-France, one of the solutions laid in identifying her department's curricular identity.

> "Your summary tables of the MEQ curriculum are amazing. I hadn't yet found enough courage to take on this monumental task. Even though there is still a

> lot of work to do on that front, the action research process has allowed me to better define the identity of our curriculum and to validate its worth".

c) Empowerment

While recognition had been very present in the educators discourse at the beginning of my internship, when I asked them to give me feedback on the action research, most of them said they felt empowered. While recognition from peers in other departments continues to be an important issue, it seemed to have faded somewhat. Our work together via discussions and development of a concrete model for their community appeared to have given them a different type of recognition: recognition from within. As Marie-France suggested, they understand their practice better, see real value in their work and are motivated to continue learning and develop professionally.

Many educators stated that seldom do they have time to reflect on their practice and the action research allowed for that time even if at times it appeared limited.

d) Professional Development

The literature reports on the favorable aspects of action research in terms of professional development for practitioners. It is said that action research allows practitioners to engage in educational research, curriculum development, and evaluation. It also lets practitioners take responsibility for their own professional development and provides a vehicle for theories about teaching initiated from the ground-up (Zeichner, 1993).

Looking at back at this action research, it has allowed for this museum's coordinator to decide where to begin making improvements by identifying areas where she and her team perceived a cluster of problems of mutual concern and consequence. More specifically Marie-France noted that the action research allowed educators to be actively involved in a reflective process about their work and fostered professional development. Marie-France herself has suggested:

> "It is a little destabilizing to lose our facilitator, however I plan to pursue this action research process".

For the educators, professional development translated into theoretical gains in terms of learning about educational theory or personal growth in terms of getting constructive feedback about their practice from somebody outside the department.

Conclusion

This study exemplifies what Shulman (1986) called "specific instances of practice" through which an action research and her collaborators generated a set of hypotheses and concepts that other researchers, educators and museologists can transport to similar research problems and to other substantive fields. Such a museum-research partnership represents an excellent opportunity for knowledge building about museum education practice. This co-generative inquiry has allowed for an educational researcher and knowledgeable museum education staff to collaboratively assess museum education practice, define issues to be addressed, analyze results from research and determine changes and interventions. Greenwood and Levin (2000) hold that these types of relationships "between the professional researcher and the local stakeholders is based on bringing the diverse bases of all participants' knowledge and their distinctive social locations to bear on a problem collaboratively" (p.96). This type of partnership also responds to a call for

professional development in museums allowing museum practitioners to develop skills and knowledge to contribute to professional understanding as a whole (Woollard, 1999).

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